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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BE](#) [RW](#) [CG](#) [EU](#)

SUBJECT: BELGIAN GOVERNMENT INCHES TOWARD ACTION ON CRISIS
IN THE CONGO

Classified By: Counselor for Political and Economic Affairs Richard Eas
on for reason 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. Summary: (C) The situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo) is currently the number one real-time foreign policy concern for the Belgian Government and one of the top stories in the Belgian press (French and Flemish). The GoB issued statements October 30 calling for an immediate cease fire in Eastern Congo and announcing that Belgium would send C-130 transports to evacuate Belgian nationals. The Belgian response to the humanitarian crisis in Eastern Congo has evolved from diplomacy alone; last week, FM DeGucht told Parliament". . . an EU military mission would be counterproductive in Congo." Now, our MFA contacts confirm that Belgium supports a European force with a clearly defined mission, a strengthening of MONUC's mandate in the UNSC, and a renewed diplomatic offensive in Kigali and Kinshasa. The evolution in Belgian policy was spurred by the humanitarian crisis of civilian refugees uprooted by Nkunda's recent offensive in the Goma area. NGO pressure to react to the fighting was buoyed by heavy coverage in the Belgian media. Launching a European mission to support MONUC in the Eastern Congo will be challenging both in European and Belgian domestic terms. On the European side, several European countries are consulting with each other to determine what the others intend to do. A European agreement is not a foregone conclusion, and multiple procedural questions need answered. For Belgium, a parliamentary vote to participate is expected to pass after heated argument, overriding the prohibition on sending troops to former Belgian colonies in Africa that has been followed since the end of the Rwandan genocide.

¶2. (S) On the diplomatic front, MFA contacts told PolOff on October 30 that FM DeGucht has confirmed he will meet Rwanda President Kagame Friday evening or Saturday morning. Belgium believes that Kagame has very strong leverage over Nkunda and could help stop the current crisis; they hope the United States and the U.K. will also use their leverage with Kagame to end the violence. Our MFA contacts would like to know if Secretary Rice has talked to Kagame. In the long run, they insist that Kabila remains the key to the situation in Eastern Congo, and feel that FM DeGucht's frequent criticism of Kabila and U.S. policy in the Congo was on the mark. End Summary.

Belgium and the Congo

¶3. (SBU) The Congo is among the most important bilateral relationships for Belgium, stemming from its long and fraught colonial history. A significant portion of Belgium's foreign assistance budget is slated for the Congo, but these funds have been frozen due to the diplomatic row that followed FM

DeGucht's frank criticism last year of Congo's leader, Laurent Kabilia, on human rights and corruption. Kabilia responded by closing Belgium's consulates in Lubumbashi and Bukavu.

¶4. (C) During an October 23 meeting with visiting U.S. Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Joyce Leader, MFA contacts stated that Belgium supported a diplomatic solution to the current violence in the Kivus. They placed the blame for the intensified conflict on a lack of political will between Congo's President Laurent Kabilia and Rwanda's President Joseph Kagame. They suggested that a further clarification and strengthening of MONUC's mandate was all that should be done to reduce violence in the Eastern Congo. Finally, our interlocutors said Belgium was resistant to calls for deploying an EU force in Congo, though public pressure for action was growing. They noted that other EU members states were receiving similar pressure, and the GOB was concerned that more impressionable member states like the Netherlands and Sweden might push for imprudent action.

Public Pressure

¶5. (C) International NGOs conducted a strong pressure campaign to urge GOB action on humanitarian issues in the Congo last week. Our MFA contacts received representatives of both Oxfam and Amnesty International October 23, who highlighted the sexual violence against women perpetrated by the various armed groups in eastern Congo. At a DCM hosted lunch for Envoy Leader, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Hilda Vautmans noted that multiple NGO groups

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pressed for immediate action to end the sexual violence in eastern Congo at her October 22 hearing on the Congo. She expressed deep concern with the violence, especially that directed towards women, but noted that the current budget environment made it very difficult for Belgium to take further action. Professor Jean-Claude Willame, one of Belgium's foremost Congo experts, and a member of Amnesty's board, responded that the NGO community was pushing for military action now, arguing that only military force could end the most serious violence. He suggested that an EU quick response force would be a perfect solution to augment MONUC and take action, where the current MONUC soldiers have failed to protect civilians.

¶6. (SBU) Coverage of the humanitarian crisis, particularly the tens of thousands of civilians forced to flee by Nkunda's offensive in the Goma area, has prominently featured in all major news media. MFA contacts noted that reports are being carried in both French and Flemish press, while Africa reporting had traditionally been the province of the French-language papers.

Belgium's Moves Towards Action

¶7. (C) Our MFA contacts suggested that the NGO pressure, the well-publicized humanitarian dimension, as well as the resignation of the Spanish MONUC commander over the weekend, convinced the GoB that diplomatic action was not sufficient. According to MFA contacts, FM DeGucht began calling his European counterparts to gauge their intentions. They said the French seemed the most sympathetic, and the French Presidency would naturally take the lead in pushing for any European action. DeGucht requested a meeting of the core Cabinet, which was held October 30.

The GoB made the following decisions:

-- Belgium would be ready to join a European force if a decision to deploy a battle group were taken.

-- The Foreign Ministry would push for a stronger MONUC

mandate in the UNSC.

-- Diplomatic initiatives would be launched in Kigali and Kinshasa. (Note: DeGucht has already confirmed he will meet Kagame this weekend. The first contacts have already been made with the Congolese Foreign Minister to arrange a meeting. End Note)

-- Belgium's two C-130's in Kinshasa will soon be made ready to deploy for humanitarian assistance.

This evolving policy is significantly more activist than the GOB's position of last week. During his October 22 address to Parliament, DeGucht stated, "An additional European military effort would be counterproductive, and President Kabila accepting European troops was unlikely."

18. (S) MFA contacts cautioned that the suggested European force would take time to muster. They said the member states inclined towards action were all watching each other to see what the others would do, in a slowly shrinking circle that would hopefully result in a consensus. They noted that the French Presidency and EU FM Solana had just held a press conference, proposing a very "cautious mission" that would deploy an EU battle group for a short time to solve the current humanitarian crisis. Its mandate would be to support MONUC, secure the airport and immediate surroundings and relaunch the Goma process. The MFA said in confidence that not all of the countries making up the Eurocorps battle group may support a mission -- Belgium (yes), Sweden (probably), the Netherlands (probably), Germany (unclear but SPD likely to oppose), Spain (unknown), and Luxembourg (unknown). Even if all contributor countries agreed, an agreement by all 27 member countries may be necessary before the force could be deployed.

19. (C) Belgium's participation in a "peacemaking" force in Africa would depart from its post-Rwanda policy that Belgian troops cannot be deployed in former colonies. The MFA is currently researching whether this "Rwanda Commission" restriction is applicable to all missions or only U.N. missions. Our MFA contacts said a parliamentary vote would probably be necessary before action could be taken. They brushed aside PolOff's suggestion that such a vote might be difficult for political, historical and community

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(French-Flemish) reasons. They noted that the left wing NGO community crying the loudest for action would likely bring the French Socialist Party (PS) along and that the French-speaking community and press was traditionally quite activist in Africa issues. They added that the Flemish press and parties had traditionally been the most critical of Belgian involvement in Africa, but that Flemish media was giving the events in Congo as much story time and page-space as the French-speaking media. Furthermore, the Flemish PM, FM and DefMin were all supportive of joining an E.U. force. In sum, our contacts believe that if a vote came to Parliament, appropriately worded, the measure would pass.

Congo Policy and Questions

110. (C) Our interlocutors underscored that any EU mission and the current outreach to Kagame to reign in Nkunda was a short term effort to end the current crisis. Long term, the major problem was Kabila. Their message to the United States was: be less lenient to Kabila! They admitted they have been in damage control mode since their consulates were closed by Kabila in April, but maintain their criticism has been accurate all along. Kabila's democratic credentials do not make him beyond reproach. Belgium had warned Kabila he would lose an eastern offensive, and apparently he has. The weapons that Kabila receives are used to loot, pillage, kill civilians, or are sold. His army is as FM DeGucht said in an interview in the Flemish paper De Standaard, ". . . an

unregulated gang that burns, rapes, and pillages. . . with no control."

¶11. (S) Our contacts said that FM DeGucht called Secretary Rice October 29. FM DeGucht understood that she would call President Kagame. They would like to know if the call was made. Please confirm if possible.

¶12. (S) For AF/C: Belgian reports indicate that a former candidate for President of Congo, Oscar Kashala, with close ties to the United States, was back in Rwanda and in communication with Nkunda's CNDP. Our MFA contacts suggested that he could give the CNDP a political face and help them develop a platform. It would change the game if the CNDP became politically active. Embassy would appreciate knowing whether AF/C has information about Kashala that may be useful to Belgium.

¶13. (C) CNDP: Our MFA contacts said Nkunda is sick. They believe he has diabetes and a serious sexually transmitted disease. They have confirmed he gets helicopter lifts to Rwanda for treatment. There are several persons in Belgium who claim to represent the CNDP, but it is difficult to determine who truly speaks for Nkunda and get beyond the propaganda. The Belgians have received rumors of infighting, though the CNDP seems stronger than ever. The CNDP has been able to strengthen itself and can now attack from strongholds. Its recent psychological warfare efforts seemed remarkable when 20-30 soldiers were able to use noises or bluster to scare off two to three thousand troops.

Comment

¶14. (C) The Belgian government is working with the EU to send an Eurocorps battle group to Congo. Whether they are successful or not would seem to depend on other member states and the ability of other Europeans to agree that the humanitarian crisis in the Congo warrants an EU deployment. The problems further demonstrate the difficulty the EU has in taking action during a fast-moving crisis. Domestically, what is striking is that the Flemish-led government is pushing so hard to solve the current humanitarian crisis in Congo, when Africa policy was traditionally the province of Francophone politicians. Sending troops to Africa would also require Belgium to break with its prohibition on deploying troops in former colonies, though our MFA contacts believe there would be little effective parliamentary opposition. Belgium clearly remains concerned about events in its former colony, and is working hard to make diplomacy work in Africa, and to build up support among Allies and in the EU. It is making a valorous attempt to lead without leading.

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